Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life* by Renyi Hong (Duke University Press)

by Kuansong Victor Zhuang | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Passionate Work*, Hong argues that passion at work is an affective structure perpetuated by capitalism to maintain its injustices and discipline workers. Examining historical managerial texts and ideology, career guides, social scientific work on unemployment, networking advice, software protocol, and office furniture, Hong shows how these are sites where discourses of passion are embedded, used to sustain and discipline bodies for work. The book draws attention to how the demand to be "passionate about work" is naturalized and internalized, calling attention to the ways that passion serves to obscure inequalities.

KEYWORDS passion, work

Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life. By Renyi Hong. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 248 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1822-3. US List $26.95.

For Renyi Hong, objects such as historical managerial texts and ideology, career guides, social scientific work on unemployment, networking advice, software protocol, and office furniture are sites in which discourses of passion are embedded, used to sustain and discipline bodies for work. In an era where workers are often called on to be passionate about the work that we do, Hong's work draws attention to how passion is in fact normalized and internalized as part of the natural order of things.

Passionate Work builds on an emerging body of scholarship that critiques how affective structures are deployed at work. In 2015, Miya Tokumitsu highlighted how the mantra of "doing what you love" lends itself to exploitative practices such as overworking and underpayment.[1] More recently, Ergin Bulut's examination of the video games industry discusses the alienation and exploitation of game testers who are asked to do what they love.[2] Erin Cech has problematized the notion of passion, critiquing the ways in which passion poses problems to the working class and reinforces social inequality.[3] Hong follows in this tradition to critique passion and its deployment at work. However, his use of a diverse and innovative methodology to examine a wide corpus of texts—which offers a genealogy of passion and its deployment—makes Hong's book a distinctive contribution to these conversations.

Hong's main argument throughout the book is that passion at work is an affective structure perpetuated by capitalism to maintain its injustices. Being passionate about work, both in and outside of employment, is replete in contemporary societies, and often described as positive and desirable. We are told and sold the promise "that work executed in line with one's passions will realize our creative capacities and contribute towards building a better world" (2). This deployment of passion, for Hong, is a ploy where workers trade their bodies, time, and labor "for a fantasy of passionate work or self-exploitative pleasure" (4). And while some bodies are more compensated and rewarded for making these tradeoffs, it is those who are exploited, tricked into economic hardship, uncertainty, and income scarcity that Hong is ultimately concerned with. For these groups, "Passion emerges . . . as a means of endurance, a way of cobbling a veneer of normalcy amid protracted economic disenchantment" (6). This passion is problematic, as Hong describes, for it becomes "a means of assuming sameness and difference in feelings, a tool to produce the terms by which unvalued workers in mundane occupations are to be pitied and rescued from their predicament" (8).

Against this background, Hong begins chapter one by analyzing managerial ideology to offer a genealogy of passion in work. As he explains, managerial texts first adopted the notion of happiness as the desired state for workers at work. However, happiness also meant workers were content "in a bland but secure ordinary existence" (42), detrimental to one's individualities, and ultimately corporate profits. Hong traces how from the mid-twentieth century, and paralleling the emergence of psychological studies focused on self-actualization, managerial texts began to focus on passion to drive workers' desires for self-actualization. This, ultimately, is problematic—while workers are disciplined and managed, first for happiness and later with passion, the prioritization of such affective states at work means that other kinds of ethical responsibilities are overlooked such as paying fair wages.

Chapter two puts forth a two-part argument to discuss unemployment and the role passion plays. The first focuses on the apathy unemployment brings, through a reading of *Marienthal*, an influential study of a village of unemployed persons and their mindsets. In the second part, reading a range of career guides, Hong considers how passion "can be rendered [as] a modality for resilience, a way for the serialized unemployed to persist in a brutal marketplace by presenting themselves as undamaged" (20). For Hong, unhappiness is manifested in these career guides, and serves as a technology of governance, meant to keep those unemployed dissatisfied in their current state, further perpetuated by welfare programs around unemployment. Passion in this instance serves to encourage the unemployed to continue to be productive for the purposes of neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter three examines workers who endure poor conditions of work, focusing attention on those who engage in repetitive work, such as call centers, production lines, and cashiers. Here, Hong discusses how gamification and the theory of flow are adopted as means to condition these workers by disconnecting them from the trauma they might experience in their current situation(s), so as to keep them

psychologically unscathed and motivated for boring and tedious work. Chapter four examines the built infrastructure of co-working spaces as the means to preserve passions. Hong zooms in on the figure of the middle-class lonely freelancer and how coworking spaces and notions of coworking serve "to build a space for attunement to the rhythms of capitalism, where workers feel "right" and affectively aligned to how they ought to be feeling about their work" (22).

In the conclusion, Hong offers an alternative to passion, what he terms *passio*—which "understands emotions and desires as external instead of internal, as forces coming upon the individual rather than forces originating from one's authentic nature" (179). As he explains, what the use of passion at work does is to forge and connect workers to the need to labor, "making work a necessary presence for survival" (167). Importantly, Hong highlights the ways in which passion obscures the problems of capitalism—one where "workers gain pleasure, hope, and autonomy, which are met with exploitative conditions in return: low wages, insecurity, long hours, high stress, individualized burden, and a winner-take-all market" (161). The critical distance passio creates between the self and our attachments to passion, Hong argues, allows the possibility of struggling with or even rejecting discourses of passion in our lives.

In today's context, where wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, and where inequalities between the top and bottom are growing not only within industries but also across regions of the world, *Passionate Work* offers a distinct contribution to scholarship by highlighting how our affective states are manipulated to keep us contented both at work and in work. Such is the case for many industries, including academia, in which overwork and underpay is common, and those in contingent and precarious positions are often extolled to be passionate about our work. It is in calling attention to the ways that passion can also obscure inequalities, even as it offers a means of encouraging workers, that *Passionate Work* offers a key entryway into a critical praxis that allows us to

recognize the affective structures which both disciplines workers and are themselves embraced by workers today.

Notes

1. Miya Tokumitsu, *Do What You Love: And Other Lies about Success & Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).
2. Ergin Bulut, *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020).
3. Erin Cech, *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2021).

Author Information

Kuansong Victor Zhuang

Kuansong Victor Zhuang is currently a Visiting Fellow at the University of Sydney and an International Postdoctoral Scholar at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University. He was a Chevening scholar in 2013–14, and a 2022–23 Princeton University Fung Global Fellow. His research lies at the intersections of communications, media, cultural studies, and disability studies, especially as they pertain to inclusion and the workings of technology. He hopes to use his research to contribute to current debates about how inclusion happens both in Singapore and around the world.

View all of Kuansong Victor Zhuang's articles.

Article details

Kuansong Victor Zhuang, "Review of *Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life by Renyi Hong* (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.17

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053